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THE DEMON
OF THE
FOREST

Perched on Little John's shoulders, Friar Tuck brought his quarter-staff down with great force upon the head of a Norman who rushed from the door.

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THE DEMON OF THE FOREST

CHAPTER 1.

The Crimes of Renault the Tax-Gatherer.

"THOUGH women weep, and children cry for bread, the royal coffers must be filled."

Such indeed was the motto of the Norman oppressors. North, east, west, and south they went in bands, confident in their armed strength, scattering poverty and misery wherever they appeared.

There were Court favourites to bestow honour and riches upon, spies to be paid, and rascals, who threatened while they fawned, to be silenced with hush-money. Also there was an army of aliens, who hated the real owners of the land, to be kept up.

Vagabonds from Normandy, from Bohemia, from the Lowlands, were encouraged to join the ranks and share in the plunder. And many of these so-called "soldiers of fortune" had not been in this country many years before they built castles on stolen land, adopted the devices of the noble and the brave, and shamefully enslaved an innocent and ancient people.

One of the most notorious of the tax-gatherers of those days—Renault by name—was travelling south. He had a goodly-company with him, as far as numbers went. Bowmen, billmen, horse and foot, banners waving, trumpets sounding.

Alas! every blare from brazen instrument fell like

a death-knell upon the ears of the unhappy Saxons.

Sir Evremond Renault had been well chosen for his post. The hot blood of a southern land flowed in his veins, the hatred of the English was in his heart, and his nature was a compound of greed and malice.

Standing over six feet in height, as strong as a giant and as subtle and fierce as a tiger, his frown made the stoutest-hearted of his followers tremble. For Evremond Renault never spoke twice of a fault. The stroke of a sword or a stab from a dagger removed all annoyances from his path.

Mounted on a coal-black horse, a blood-red dragon upon his shield, Renault rode on with his train.

Tramp, tramp! harness jingling, arms and armour flashing, and a great banner—torn by desperate men—fluttering in the wind.

And wherever that banner went the sweetness of budding springtime died away, and the very breeze seemed to lose its softness and to moan at the approach of so ghastly an emblem of man's greed.

Rising on a natural terrace, on a gently-sloping hill, stood a village in the New Forest. That place is now called Lyndhurst, prosperous and beautiful, but in those days it was a mere hamlet inhabited by a frugal and contented people.

The tingling of many bells told of cattle, sheep, and goats grazing in the forest glades. The milk-

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maid, in short kirtle and braided hair, sang as she drove the meek-eyed cows from the pastures at the dying of the day, and happy Saxon children played about the cottage doors.

It was yet early morning when Renault, on coming in sight of the hamlet, halted his forces.

The red sun hung low in the eastern sky, and the wind-flowers and "lords and ladies" had scarcely lifted their heads to greet the day.

The song of the thrush filled the air, the young grass was shooting its countless spires, and the tender green was in the gorse and broom.

"Yonder," said Renault, pointing with his sword, "lives the man I have had warning of. 'Tis said of this Arthur Lovedale that he has boasted of being a match for any three Normans. This day he shall be put on his trial. But, apart from that, he is a man of means. Twice a week does he go to South Hamtune* to buy and sell stock, and each time he returns with gold and silver in his wallet."

At this moment an old woman, gathering sticks, came hobbling painfully along.

"By the rood!" she said, shading her eyes with her withered hand, "a noble show! 'Tis long since I saw such a one, and that was when Richard the Lion-hearted rode a-hunting through the forest. It was the day after the king had granted a charter to South Hamtune."

"Silence, hag!" Renault said. "Now, list to me. Point me out the house where Arthur Lovedale dwells."

"He dwells where his will takes him, for all doors are open to him—ay, and to his good wife and bonny children, too. I am his poor old but proud mother!"

Sir Evremond Renault threw his head back and laughed.

"Wildebrand," he said, turning to the man who bore his shield, "luck comes to us with the opening day, for we have caught the mother of the Saxon churl whom we seek."

"I am the mother of a good man,"

the old woman retorted, raising herself proudly in spite of her infirmities. "Arthur I bore and two more sons, but he alone survives. Shall I tell you why?"

"Prate on," said Evremond Renault.

"My two boys who lie in their graves were summoned to fight against their own countrymen. They refused, and were taken there and then to the walls of the West Gate at South Hamtune and hanged."

"And pray you, tell me why Arthur escaped?" Renault demanded.

"He fled at the approach of the soldiers," replied the dame. "He had a wife and child to support, and no man blamed him. He lived for their sakes, and the other children who came after. But what want you with him?"

"My business is with you for the moment," Evremond Renault replied. "Take yourself hence into the forest, for if I see you again to-day you shall surely die."

"You talk of death! Whenever Norman comes the air is always full of woe! Take care what you do. Beware of the men in Lincoln green!"

So saying, the old woman hobbled away.

"By all the powers! I did wrong to let her go," Renault said. "What meant she by 'Beware of the men in Lincoln green'?"

"There is a rumour that Robin Hood and some of his archers have been seen in these parts," Wildebrand replied. "At least, so it was told me at the inn we last lodged at."

Renault's brow wrinkled in anger.

"Why has this been kept from me?" he thundered.

"Because I did not believe in the report, and—and I did not like to cause you annoyance with the gossip of idle loons."

"Fool!" Renault cried, placing his mailed hand upon his sword. "Have I not told you, sirrah, to make me acquainted with everything you hear? By the bones of the Conqueror! it would seem that I have traitors in my midst. Hark you, Wildebrand! had you not twice stood between me and death when beggarly Saxons struck me,

* The Southampton of to-day. In the Saxon tongue Ham stood for a dwelling; and tune meant a town.

your head and shoulders should part at this moment. But let it go; offend no more, for I never forgive a second time."

"See yonder!" cried a crossbowman. "The old woman is sneaking back to the village."

"Maldron," said Renault, "you are master of your weapon. See what a bolt can do to teach her a lesson in obedience."

Maldron dropped on one knee and sent a quarrel, or arrow, twanging from his crossbow. Was it that his hand shook at the thought of the dreadful deed he had been commanded to perform? Did he, by chance, allow his thoughts to dwell for a moment upon his own mother?

Whatever the cause, the bolt flew wide of its mark, and ere another could be sent upon its cruel mission the old woman had sought safety in flight and had entered a small copse where the thick undergrowth hid her from murderous Norman view.

In his black anger Renault turned upon Maldron; but ere he could carry out his intention and strike the hireling down, his attention was claimed by the opening of the door of Arthur Lovedale's house and the sudden appearance of Lovedale's beautiful wife.

The poor woman had seen what had just happened; but she did not flinch, although her heart seemed to rise to her mouth.

"Your name?" demanded Renault.

"Agatha Lovedale."

"A second good hit this morning," the tax-gatherer said. "Bid your husband come to me. He must be a lazy hog to lie snoring abed."

"My husband," came the quietly spoken reply, "is away from home, and when he will return I know not, for he has much business in hand in a northerly direction."

"In that case," Renault replied, "pay me thirty nobles and I will depart."

"I make no payment without my husband's permission," Agatha Lovedale replied haughtily. "Least of all should I pay toll to cruel Norman robbers."

"Robbers!" yelled Renault, throwing himself from his horse. "By my sword! I'll teach you how to keep a civil tongue."

As he seized her left arm, she struck him full in the face with her right hand.

He staggered back, drawing his sword and raising it to strike. Coldly defiant, Agatha Lovedale waited for the blow to fall; and the steadiness in her eyes saved her from instant death.

"Bind her to yonder tree," Renault roared to his followers. "I would be too merciful to slay her. Instead, shall she stand helpless and watch while we sack and burn her home. I warrant there will be good measure of plunder in the house of Arthur Lovedale."

At his command two Norman ruffians seized the woman and, dragging her to the tree, bound her there with thongs which cut deep into her flesh.

Ere that was done the remainder of the band rushed pell-mell into the house, driving out Arthur Lovedale's children, and the few retainers who had not already fled, at the point of the sword.

Then came the search for money and such valuables as Renault could carry away; but little was found, and the Norman raved in the tempest of his horrible rage.

By this time the people of the hamlet were up and hurrying from the scene.

"The Normans are upon us!" they cried. "Awake, neighbours, and away to the forest. Save your lives! Live for revenge!"

Half-dressed, disorganised, and in many cases without weapons of any kind, they fled, the old, the young, the lame, and the blind.

What sport for the Normans, to hunt the poor creatures! The forest rang with cries of anguish.

But soon all was quiet, and a great pall of smoke shut out the blue sky.

"Enough!" said Renault. "The news will spread, and our reception will be more civil at the next kennel of hounds we enter."

And yet, as he rode away, the old woman's words, "Beware of the men in Lincoln green," rang in his ears.

The day passed. Lovedale's children and their grandmother returned and released Agatha, who throughout the terrible ordeal had remained bold and defiant to the brutal Normans, who had not hesitated to heap insults upon her head.

The fires burned slowly out, leaving nothing but great heaps of charred, leaning, tottering walls, and heaps of smouldering ashes, and when the pale moon looked down upon the scene of devastation others of the survivors crept back.

The silver-lined limes quivered, and the dark oaks shuddered, and every flower and spray hung its head as if in sorrow.

Next morning, amid a jingling of bells, the cracking of a whip, and the shout of a hearty voice, Arthur Lovedale returned.

No evil had he dreamt. No omen of coming trouble had placed the weight of despair upon his heart.

In the cart, drawn by the team of long-horned oxen, he had presents for his wife and children.

How they would welcome him! His beloved Agatha, with her arms about his neck; his children, storming the strong citadel of his back to share the envied kiss.

"Ho, there! Come up, Thor! Lift your head, Odin!" he cried, calling the oxen by their names. "Put your neck to the yoke, for yonder lies home, peace, and rest!"

Yet he wondered, at the haze lingering between earth and sky.

He had come into it suddenly, and it had a pungent smell and a gritty taste.

But what was this? Some people were coming towards him. He could see, too, his wife Agatha and his children—Alfred, Edwy, Gunhilda, and the baby Agatha, named after her mother. They flung their arms wildly over their heads and shouted.

And so Arthur Lovedale learned the dread news. So he was made acquainted with the dreadful things which the Normans had done. He was homeless—his wife and children were homeless, and many of his neighbours had been slain.

For a time no sound left his lips. He merely stood, white and cold as marble. Even Agatha feared to break in upon his thoughts, so stern was the look upon his pallid features.

But when at last he spoke no word of sorrow, no feeble wailing came to their ears.

Instead, standing erect, with the desolation of the plunderers before him, he registered a vow—a vow that never would he rest until he had avenged the cruel work which the Normans had performed, and brought to book the leader of the raiders—Sir Evremond Renault.

And ere another day had dawned Arthur Lovedale had started upon his grim mission of vengeance.

CHAPTER 2.

Lovedale Meets Robin Hood.

SOFT were the sounds of pensive eve.

From the far distance came the notes of the angelus, calling the monks to prayer, and telling that the day's work was done.

Spring, with sunlight in his eyes, and laughter on his mouth, had kissed the yearning Earth, and she, arising from her long sleep, clad herself in gorgeous garments.

At the end of a forest glade the almonds and wild-apple trees, bursting into bloom at one touch of spring's magic wand, blushed pink and red to find themselves so near the lusty oaks and red-crowned beeches.

A lightly-trodden path ran through the glade, ending in a maze of blue, deepening into black, where the towering firs and stately larches grew.

Mingling with the songs of the birds, invisible in their bowers of emerald green and fragrant blossom, came the hum of a mill, as the great wheel turned slowly amid the foaming water; and a short distance from the path a streak of blue smoke rose as straight as one of Robin Hood's arrows into the air.

On the stump of a felled tree sat Friar Tuck and Little John, back to back.

The giant leaned heavily on the handle of his axe, watching the sun-

light and shadow as they played upon the shining blade.

Friar Tuck, rosy of face, but solemn, and apparently sulky, nursed his quarter-staff upon his knees, jiggling it up and down as he cast a furtive glance over his shoulder.

It was evident that some little difference had sprung up between the friar and his burly friend.

"By St. Anthony!" cried the friar, "I have always held, and hold so now, that half a truth is worse than a lie!"

"No man, not even a priest, shall call me liar!" retorted Little John, giving the handle of his axe an angry twist. "If I be a child of the Church, I am no slave to it!"

Friar Tuck laughed softly.

"John—Little John," he said, sliding round and meeting the giant face to face, "no man has a right to be a slave to anything, not even his imagination."

"My faith!" cried Little John, "you will drive me to fury. I wish I had never told you! Why do you mock me?"

"Not mock! I laughed at you because it is my duty to set your mind against such nonsense as witchcraft, ghosts, ghouls, goblins, and a host of other myths. You were dreaming, John."

"I'll swear to my dying day I was not," the giant said. "I was never more awake or in my senses. I saw the fearful creature. It looked me full in the face, and then, uttering a sound like the short bark of a famished wolf, it vanished before my eyes."

Friar Tuck took his chin between his forefinger and thumb, and squeezed the dimple out of it.

"Tell me again," he said.

"Why should I? Oh, well, if I must, I must! Last night, just as the horned moon was sinking, I was standing where duty called me, at the end of this glade. The camp was still, and all was so quiet that I seemed to feel the very roll of the earth beneath my feet.

"Above, those seven great lamps in heaven we call the Plough looked down upon me, and now and then there came the flash of a shooting star. I was

thinking of the strange case that has brought us to the New Forest, when out of the darkness there stole a figure, such as I never yet gazed upon."

Friar Tuck sat down at Little John's side, and rested his head upon his shoulder, as if to encourage him.

"It had the form of a man," the giant continued, "yet it was more animal than man. Its legs and arms were bare, and its body like a wolf's. Its face was hideous, with great, glowing eyes and fang-like teeth. Masses of black hair fell over its shoulders——"

"My son," the friar interrupted, "what was the length of this wonderful being's ears?"

"I did not notice," Little John replied. "But why do you ask?"

"Because," said the friar calmly, "if you had told me that they were very long, like unto an ass's ears, I should have said that you had been deceived by your own shadow."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The sound of two laughing voices brought the blood into Little John's weather-beaten cheeks, and looking round he saw Will Scarlet and Much the Miller's son approaching.

"How now, Sirs Red Stockings and White Smock?" growled the giant angrily. "Save your grins and guffaws for the next country fair, for, of a truth, both your faces, well daubed with grease and paint, would draw a crowd anywhere."

"Why, Little John, what ails you?" exclaimed Will Scarlet in amazement. "You are not the subject of our mirth."

"If that be so, I cry your pardon," said the giant. "But, by my halidame, the friar is enough to vex a saint. Why so merry, then?"

"A party of mountebanks, clad in motley, and as full of antics as apes, have arrived, and Robin Hood has bidden them stay for your amusement. So come and see," Will Scarlet replied.

"What manner of countrymen be they?" Little John demanded.

"They speak in a strange tongue, and as none of us know any but our own, there is much dispute. Allan-a-Dale puts them down as Bretons; Dick Driver says they are Spaniards; while

Ned Carter inclines to the belief that they are from the mountains of Italy."

"What knows he of Italy?" said Friar Tuck contemptuously. "If, indeed, they be Italians, they must know something of the Latin tongue. 'Faith! I'll try them. Give me your arm, Little John, and come along."

"No more jokes at my expense," the giant growled. "Friar, a word with you. I am not of an inquisitive nature, but fain would I know what has brought Robin here to the New Forest so far from Sherwood. He has a secret he is keeping from us! I read it in his face. Worm that secret out of him if you can."

"My son," the friar replied, "speaking as a man of peace, I have no desire to see Robin Hood's fist closer to my nose than it is now. Rest assured that he will tell us all in good time. If your eyes could penetrate through ten miles of this forest, what would you behold but a mighty stretch of waters, and on its brink the mighty walls of South Hamtune. I trow that our chief has his eyes upon that place. But rest in patience, and leave it to the man who has led us so bravely."

By the time these words had been spoken the two had come to the camp-fire, over which a huge cauldron, laden with something that gave forth an appetising aroma, bubbled and spluttered.

Round and near the fire sat fifty foresters, clad in Lincoln green. Their plumed caps and bows and quivers, well filled with arrows, lay beside them.

Perched on a little hillock was Robin Hood, hale, hearty, and as strong as ever; and at his feet, in grotesque attitudes, sprawled four mountebanks, two of them past the middle age, and bearded, and the others young and muscular.

One held a curiously-shaped reed instrument, and as he blew some strangely weird notes on it the others started up and danced and leaped and flung themselves about in the most extraordinary manner.

All were dressed in parti-coloured tight-fitting skirts reaching to their knees, but they wore neither hose nor choon.

The friar and Little John looked on at the performance in silence, until one by one the three men fell on the grass out of sheer exhaustion.

As they lay panting for breath, their chests heaving and their heads wagging, Friar Tuck said loudly:

"Risum teneatis amici."

The mountebanks paid no heed whatever.

"What did you say?" Little John demanded.

"I asked you, my friend, if you could refrain from laughter," the friar replied. "These men know not one word of Latin, or pretend not to, for they did not even look my way; but ask me to reveal my thoughts, and I should say that these men are not common vagrants, but come from some great castle, or, may be, the Royal Court itself."

In the meantime, the man who had played upon the reed instrument was going among the foresters with a curiously shaped shell, into which many a coin was dropped.

Then, on a sudden, he and his companions formed in a row, bowed almost to the ground, and then dashed away at full speed into the forest.

"They have the wings of sprites upon their heels," Little John said.

"Beshrew me, but they have cunning working in their brains," Friar Tuck muttered. "I like it not; for it seems to me that the varlets came more to spy than dance and beg. But I'll not bring a cloud to Robin Hood's brow to-night. Little John, my child, when all is quiet you and I will creep away in the forest, and see what we can see."

"I'm with you, friar," replied the giant lustily. "But hark! Robin Hood is speaking."

"My brave followers," the King of Sherwood Forest was saying, "you have come with me many long weary miles and through much tempestuous weather without murmuring, without asking a question. But now I will tell you what brings me here, and where our destination shall be.

"It is where Canute sat and put his fawning courtiers to shame. You know the story which has been handed down

to us by our sires, so I will not waste your time and mine by repeating it.

"League after league we have followed in the tracks of the wolf Renault, but in spite of long marches and all that men could do, he has eluded us."

"By our Lady! our time will come," Little John said.

"You swains with maidens that love you, you men with wives and children who constantly pray for your safety, think of the heart-breaking scenes we have witnessed during our long journey," Robin Hood continued. "Roofless houses, simple yet beloved household goods strewn about and trampled ruthlessly under foot. The bodies of children——"

"Hold, Robin Hood!" cried Will Scarlet. "Lead us where you will, but talk not of these things that have seared our eyes and haunt us in our dreams."

"Will Scarlet is right," Friar Tuck said. "These scenes of woe have curdled our blood and set our teeth on edge. What we yearn to do is to grip with this wolf in human form and the pack that follows snarling at his heels."

"Patience, then," Robin Hood replied. "I will spare you a repetition of the scenes which I have sworn to avenge. Listen. Last night, while I, in a thoughtful mood, was walking in the forest, it chanced that I lost my way: but knowing that when the moon rose it would guide me, I felt no fear. Suddenly I heard the groaning of a man in sore distress, and following the sound I came upon the sufferer. No wound had he, but great agony of spirit had brought the doleful sounds to his lips.

"Then, when I told him who I was, he narrated to me a story of unutterable woe. While he was from home on his affairs the Normans had sacked and burned his house; driving his children hence, and subjecting his wife to torment and insult, and he lived only for revenge—revenge upon the base-born tyrant, Sir Evremond Renault.

"This man, Arthur Lovedale by name, showed me where he had lain hidden in a cave, outpouring his grief and passion during the long watches of the night because he felt himself power-

less to carry out the vow of vengeance which he had made. I soothed and comforted him; I gave him my flask of wine and contents of my wallet, and told him that we would go to him this very night, for there is room for all within the cave."

"How long since were these deeds done?" Allan-a-Dale asked.

"But a few days ago," Robin Hood replied. "This unhappy man's brain must have turned against him, for he scarce knows what he has been doing. He has money lodged with a certain goldsmith who is tending his wife and children in his absence, and he offered me all that money if I would help him. And when I told him that I sought no reward for works of justice, and that I was seeking the very man who had done him wrong, he fell upon his knees and cried out that the ears of Heaven had not been shut to him. So come, friends; we'll to the cave, for if secret enemies encompass us we shall be safer there than in the open forest."

"Friar," Little John whispered, "we'll follow until we see where this cave is, and then we'll take our walk."

"So be it," Friar Tuck replied. "Son, can this man Lovedale be the same one as you saw?"

"No," Little John replied. "It would take years, not days, to turn a man into such a semblance to a beast as I saw. But wait! We shall see this Arthur Lovedale presently, and that will settle the matter."

The camp was struck quickly, and the foresters, trained to order in all things, were soon out of the glade.

Robin Hood led the way, with the ever-faithful Little John and Friar Tuck almost treading on his heels.

After trudging about two miles, by which time darkness had begun to settle upon the forest, Robin Hood stopped and blew a shrill call on his whistle.

Almost instantly Arthur Lovedale appeared from the mouth of a cavern deep and dark.

"Light have I none," he said; "but while the day lasted I was not idle. I have strewn the floor with branches that you, gracious helper of the poor, and

your brave men may rest in some comfort."

"We have some lamps and a lanthorn or two with us," Robin Hood said, "so we shall be able to see to eat our supper. Cheer up, friend Lovedale! The Non-mans claim the deer, but, my faith! we eat a fair share of them, and I trow we bring some prime joints."

The foresters, who carried wicker baskets by turn, set them down, and throwing open the lids, soon set the cave aglow with light, and prepared the repast.

"Come, Arthur Lovedale," cried Robin Hood, "away with melancholy! Drink and eat—take your fill, and so fit body and mind for the work ahead."

"Show him the way, friar," Little John whispered. "I swear that there is no man among us who can teach him better."

"Fill your own burly frame from the haunch you are carving slices an inch thick from, and hold your peace!" the friar retorted.

"When will you two cease squabbling?" demanded Robin Hood.

"Not as long as we live," replied Little John, laughing.

"That I fully believe," said the outlaw; "but let us have peace. Eat now and quarrel afterwards."

CHAPTER 3.

The Demon of the Forest.

UNKNOWN to Robin Hood, Little John and Friar Tuck slipped away while the sentries were being appointed.

A silvery light hung over the tree-tops, and, finding the path, the giant and his portly companion made good headway.

Friar Tuck had accustomed himself to keep pace with Little John by adopting a kind of ambling trot, in which there was a good deal of hopping, skipping, and jumping when obstacles appeared.

As for the giant, he strode over everything that was not longer than his tremendous legs. He crushed down small bushes, swept saplings on one side, and broke off low-hanging branches with one twist of his hand, or one sweep of his axe if they proved too sturdy for his strength.

"'Tis strange," said Little John, "that Robin Hood did not mention Arthur Lovedale before. Did I not tell you that he had a secret?"

"Not a secret, my son," Friar Tuck replied. "Our chief's mind has been busily working out some plan. Trust to him, John, as you have always done."

Little John turned almost savagely on the friar.

"Did I speak of mistrust? Did I breathe it—hint at it?" he demanded. "Listen to me, you man of peace, who crack skulls while you chuckle and crow like Momus in a fit. I tell thee this: If Robin Hood were to tell me that by my death liberty and justice to the oppressed would follow, I would go willingly to the scaffold."

"Your hand upon it, for so would I," replied the friar.

"John! Dear John! Oh, Heaven defend me! John! John!"

"What ails you now?" the giant demanded.

"It is my hand you are squeezing, not a Norman throat," the friar replied, with tears gushing from his eyes. "You have broken all my fingers."

"Tush, man; you are made of tougher stuff than that," Little John replied. "Hist! Silence! Save your groans for another time. What is that?"

"The screech of a night hawk."

"Real or feigned?"

"Be quiet, and perchance we shall soon learn."

The jarring sound came again, and was answered afar off.

"Bah!" Little John muttered under his breath; "it is not even a good imitation. Hide, friar, hide; down on your knees. I hear footsteps."

"Nature rises up against me," gasped Friar Tuck. "I am kneeling amid a bundle of thorns and a forest of nettles."

"They sting and prick less than the dagger of an assassin," Little John growled. "Down, down, I say!"

Suddenly from the depths of the forest came the four mountebanks who had played such pranks before Robin Hood and his men.

The man who had played upon the reed instrument while the others

capered and turned somersaults had something in his mouth with which he produced a sound like the shriek of a night hawk on the wing.

But neither Little John nor Friar Tuck had been deceived by it, for their practised ears were ever on the alert for sounds that might bring danger to themselves and comrades.

The mountebanks passed so close to the friar that he could have brought them down with his quarter-staff; and a strange longing came over him to do so, although they had done him no harm and might be what they seemed.

The friar, however, had grave doubts in his mind on that point.

Once it was known that Robin Hood was in the district, neither pains nor money would be spared to entrap him; but the brave outlaw had learnt how to walk round a snare rather than into it, and just when his enemies thought they had caught him neatly he appeared in some other place, to their dismay and confusion.

The four men in motley passed on in silence, save for the signal, which was answered again and again.

As soon as they were out of sight Friar Tuck stood up and rubbed his legs vigorously.

"My faith!" he groaned. "My limbs are one mass of scratches and blisters."

"Such misfortunes should teach you to wear stouter hose," Little John replied. "Be comforted, friar, with the reflection that life is but a path of briars. Even roses have thorns."

"By St. Anthony!" Friar Tuck rejoined, "what man in his senses sticks himself full of thorns if he can help it? But let us follow yonder fellows. I like not the look of them, nor do I admire their ways. Mark me, my son, they have a goodly company waiting for them somewhere."

"And, certes, they will return, company and all, if you make so much noise," Little John said. "Forget your stings and blisters."

"Lead on, and I'll hold you by the girdle," Friar Tuck replied. "Alas! the man of peace seems on fire up to his very waist."

"As you will," growled Little John;

"but as you love me, keep your quarter-staff from rapping my head like a woodpecker tapping at a tree."

Presently the path widened, and in the distance they could discern the forms of the four men they were following. Then they lost them again, and Little John stopped so abruptly that Friar Tuck struck his nose violently against the giant's back.

"It would seem," said the friar, as soon as he could speak with calmness, "that I came forth to-night for the purpose of being torn and mangled."

"Cease your complaints, and listen to me," Little John returned. "These men have turned from the path. The signals have ceased, so they must be near their destination. What say you—shall we follow quickly or wait?"

"If we wait, we must follow in the end," the friar said. "Let us go on. What! are you afraid, friend John?"

"Afraid? Oh, Heaven, what I have to put up with from this friar!" groaned the giant, chokingly. "Were he any other man, I would send him flying into the branches of a tree and leave him to roost."

Friar Tuck only laughed, and linking his arm in Little John's, trotted amiably at his side.

Proceeding with caution, and stopping now and again to listen, they reached that part of the path where it seemed to them that the mountebanks had disappeared.

"Stay you there," said Little John, pointing to a clump of bushes; "I will go amid the trees, and, perchance, shall have news to bring you."

"Take care that the demon does not start up to affright you," Friar Tuck marked in a bantering tone.

There was no time for the giant to be angry, so bottling up his wrath, he kicked off his boots, and handing them over to the friar's care, slipped amid the black shadows of the trees.

Friar Tuck was a brave man, but like the bravest he was only human, and he did not relish being left alone.

What if foes in numbers crept up suddenly and pounced upon him? It was quite possible, for not only were there the Norman spies to contend with,

but men who had been driven from their homes, and saw no harm in robbing travellers.

Friar Tuck found it impossible to crouch behind the clump of bushes. If attacked he must be ready with his quarter-staff! so he stood up and walked softly to and fro.

Merciful powers, what a time Little John was! Surely something must have happened to him. A blow or thrust, and then a stone gag pressed into his mouth, would silence him, big and strong as he was.

The wind had dropped, and even those sounds which were rife even in the forest were hushed. Everything seemed to be listening; everything, like the friar, seemed to be in a state of anxiety and suspense.

Friar Tuck had just made up his mind to bear it no longer, but to go in search of Little John, when the towering form loomed up so suddenly before him that the man of peace nearly skipped out of his sandals.

"St. Crispin!" he said, panting for breath. "How you frightened me!"

"Brace up your nerves," Little John responded. "There is an adventure before us. Yonder is a house that appears to me to belong to a ranger of the forest. Thither the mountebanks have gone, and now they are talking as good English as ourselves."

"You heard them?"

"I heard voices. Come, follow, and set your mind at ease about these men."

For the better part of half an hour they walked slowly, dodging from tree to tree, until a light streamed out from a loophole or window.

At first the band of light appeared to be moving towards them, but it was an optical delusion, for the light was only shifted from one place to another, and then remained perfectly steady.

Slowly and softly the giant and the friar stole on, apart now, so as to gain room for the swing of quarter-staff and axe should necessity arise.

Presently the house came in view.

It was a square, substantial building with a flat roof, and a kind of turret at one angle.

Near it was an outhouse, also faced with stone, and fitted with an iron door

and a small barred loophole near the roof, which in this case rose to an apex.

Friar Tuck and Little John peeped in at the window, from which the light was streaming. Two men, one in full chain armour and the other clad in a leather jerkin, with arm and thigh pieces of mail, sat at a table.

A third man, dressed as a henchman with a badge upon his arm, went round with an enormous jug filling a number of horn cups with foaming ale.

A door opened and the mountebanks entered. A great change had come over them. No longer were they clad in motley, but in the livery of a nobleman—tunics, trunks, and hose, with armorial bearings embroidered on their breasts.

They carried daggers in their belts, and short, flat-bladed swords at their sides.

Yet again the door opened, and Sir Evremond Renault, magnificently attired, strode in.

His armour, polished until it was without spot or speck, glistened in the light of the lamp, and the red dragon on his surcoat seemed to move and writhe as though it was a living thing.

"Sit you down, all, and drink to your heart's content," Renault said. "The ranger tells me that he is too poor to offer wine, but the colour of his nose seems to tell of something more mellow than thin ale. Pah! I'll have none of it. Wildebrand, and you, Sache, go and return with the varlet. I have paid him well, and well will I be entertained."

"Friar," Little John whispered, drawing him away, "is there not a way to enter that room? If we could but only set our feet within it we would save Robin Hood doing the work he has set his heart upon."

"We will wait awhile and listen," Friar Tuck replied, through his teeth. "Methinks we shall hear something that will pay us a thousandfold for the trouble."

On returning to the window, they saw that Wildebrand and Sache had returned with the occupier of the house, a tall, brawny, fearless-looking fellow.

He was striking a bargain with

Renault, and presently went his way to fetch a bottle of wine, which he declared was the only one in the house.

"And so," said Renault, turning to his henchman, "you actually bearded the lion in his den, and he really took you for mountebanks and beggars. And you but poor whifflers* and mummers, after all. Here is your reward. Garsons, throw your cap upon the table."

This was no sooner done than Renault pitched some silver pennies into the cap, remarking:

"Each groat cost a Saxon groan. But now to work my plan."

"Robin Hood with fifty men, you say," he added, striding up and down. "Humph! I have no hundred that would stand against half that number of the rebel's archers—at least, if what I have heard of them is true. We'll do better than attack him openly. We will catch the weazel asleep."

At that moment there came a yell, scarcely human in its hideous intensity.

"Ho, ranger!" said Renault; "what manner of wild animal have you here?"

"No wild animal," the ranger said. "The Demon of the Forest is abroad again. Strange it is, but true, that he comes like a weird herald when storm and trouble and death are at hand."

"The Demon of the Forest!" Renault repeated, glancing uneasily over his shoulder. "I do not understand. Who is he?"

"That, Sir Knight, is a mystery even to himself, methinks," the ranger replied. "Many stories are told of him, but they vary so much that it is impossible to get at the truth. Some say that he is of Saxon birth, and fled a maniac when but a boy into the forest, after seeing his father and mother butchered before his eyes; but no man can vouch for the truth of the story."

"Where is he now?" Renault inquired; "and what is his object in coming here?"

"As to where he is exactly that is only known to himself," the ranger answered.

Friar Tuck and Little John had, of course, received the full benefit of the wild and unearthly yell, and, scarcely knowing what to do, they crouched in the shadow of the wall.

"Does this man ever come here?" Sir Evremond Renault asked.

"When I leave food and drink for him."

"Can he be enticed here now?"

"He may be if you will consent to remain in the dark," the ranger replied.

"Like a wild cat, he will come near enough to be fed, but flees at the slightest sign of danger."

"I have a plan," Renault said. "Bring in a lanthorn and cover it up, and then extinguish the lamp. I would see this man, and, if possible, speak to him. My henchmen shall seize him at my word of command."

"Have a care, Sir Knight; Anak carries a club and knows full well how to wield it."

"Why do you call him Anak?"

"Because he is big and strong."

"My men shall be ready for the emergency," Renault assured him. "Make your preparations quickly."

The forest ranger brought in a lanthorn covered with a cloth, and then, placing some food near the jug of ale on the table, he extinguished the lamp, and opening the door, whistled as if calling to a dog.

Friar Tuck and Little John scarcely breathed. So near were they that if the ranger had looked along the wall he must have seen them.

Suddenly there came a scrambling sound, and the thud of feet.

Anak had dropped from the branch of a tree and was stealing wolf-like towards the house.

"St. Anthony defend us!" the friar thought, as beads of perspiration started on his brow. "If he catches sight of us there will be no alternative left but to kill him outright. And then what a fight there will be afterwards!"

Little John, grasping his axe in his right hand and supporting his body with his left, raised himself a little, for the mention of the club carried by Anak put him doubly on his guard.

But the black shadow hid them from

* A term bestowed upon a kind of running footmen in mediæval times. They were trained athletes, and leapt and ran in front of their lords and masters, clearing the way with swords.

view, for which they were devoutly thankful.

An odd-looking form skulked through the doorway, and presently, amid much chuckling and mumbling, there came the sound of a famished man eating and drinking, or rather gobbling and swilling.

Suddenly the cloth was lifted from the lanthorn.

There was a rush of men, and, after a brief struggle, Anak was secured.

Then Friar Tuck and Little John saw him.

More demon in appearance than man, brutal of face, and his body wrapped in the skin of a wolf, Anak presented a horrible appearance.

The friar made a motion with his hands, partly of horror and partly as a sign that he apologised to Little John for making fun of him.

"Be at peace," said Renault to Anak, holding his sword ready lest the man should break away. "No harm will be done to you. Do you understand what I say?"

"Yes," Anak replied. "Why not? Do I not hear the people in the forest talking every day? Let me go, or I will smite you with my club when I catch you asleep."

"You know the forest well?" said Evremond Renault, paying no heed to the threat.

"Who better?" Anak demanded, snarling as a cord was thrown and knotted round him.

"Where do you hide in the winter?" the Norman asked.

"In hollow trees and in the caves. The people leave me food outside their doors. If they did not I would steal. If they sought to harm me I would kill them. They are afraid of me."

"You know the value of money?"

Anak's eyes flashed for a moment, and then he broke into a fit of discordant laughter.

"I did once," he replied; "but money is nothing to me now. I only want to live as I have lived for years, and to die alone. But show me gold; I have not seen it, or touched it, since I know not when."

Sir Evremond Renault took a handful

of gold and silver coins from his richly-embroidered wallet and displayed them so that the light flashed and shimmered on the bright metal.

"Give them to me," Anak said. "They will recall the days when——" Then a vacant look came into his eyes. "No; I have no use for such baubles, and yet people say that they bring power and comfort."

"Listen to me. Do as I bid you, and whate'er you ask shall be granted. Your caves and hollow trees shall be stocked with food and wine. You shall have weapons, and a permit to kill anything that runs and flies in the forest."

"I kill enough for my wants," Anak replied, glaring defiantly at the Norman. "I can down pheasants and plovers on the wing with stones, and many a fawn has had no need to be struck twice with my club. But you speak of wine. My heart yearns for it. Give me some now."

He bit like a wild beast at the horn cup put to his lips, and emptied it at a draught.

"More! Give me more!" he cried.

"Presently," said Renault. "Men who drink rare liquor must work for it. I give you my knightly promise that if——"

At this juncture a dreadful thing happened to Friar Tuck. He was listening with bated breath and open mouth, when a long piece of grass strayed down his throat and made him cough loud enough to be heard a quarter of a mile away.

"Confusion!" Renault roared, striding towards the window. "There are strangers without. We are being spied upon. Ho, there, Wildebrand! Ho, there, all! bring me these varlets, and I will make short work of them."

"Friar," said Little John, "we are undone. Nothing less than a miracle can save us. Hark! they come, and by all that is unholy they have loosened the Demon of the Forest."

To the giant's surprise, Friar Tuck climbed upon his shoulders, and, clutching his hair with his left hand, said:

"Run, John, run! You can use your axe if these Normans hap to get in

front of you, and, trust me, my quarter-staff shall not be idle."

The chance of escape seemed a slight one indeed, but Little John made the most of it.

With a deafening roar like a lion at bay, he struck at the first henchman that rushed from the door, and a stricken and dying man collapsed and fell.

Another came, sword in hand, and Friar Tuck, taking good aim, brought his quarter-staff down with tremendous force upon the fellow's head.

Others came crowding through the doorway, and peering above their heads Sir Evremond Renault saw what seemed to him to be a monster, twelve feet in height, with four arms. The sight turned his heart sick within him.

"Close the door!" he cried, rushing back. "The foul fiend is upon us."

Three men obeyed his command, shooting the bolts in hot haste.

Friar Tuck's ruse had answered well, but to remain would have been courting suicide.

"Away, friend John," he said. "There are crossbows in that room, and bolts will soon be flying from the window."

"Sit you still," the giant replied. "Fat and unwieldy as you are, I feel your weight no more than if a feather rested on my shoulders. But have a care, friar, lest I trip or stumble in the dark, and blame me not if you go flying."

"Fear not," Friar Tuck replied. "I will stick to you as a leech sticks to the leg of a child that goes a-paddling in a horse-pond."

Without more ado Little John plunged through the forest, but he had not gone far when he was suddenly relieved of Friar Tuck's weight.

"How now?" cried the giant, swinging round. "What new prank are you up to?"

"Do you call being caught by a branch and hoisted into a tree a prank?" replied the friar dismally. "I am in a fork—stuck on a kind of wooden pitchfork, as I may say."

"A murrain seize all these mischances!" Little John said, half-laugh-

ing and half-angry. "Drop into my arms. Here I am, ready to catch you. Quick! The Norman coward has drunk courage into his veins, and is scouring the forest. Listen to those yells. The Demon of the Forest is on our track."

"Fain would I come down if I could, but I cannot," Friar Tuck replied, in dismal accents. "A part of this unholy fork has passed through my cassock, and I am a prisoner."

If ever Little John felt that fate was against him it was at this moment. Friar Tuck might be able to see him, but he could not see the friar.

"It seems to me," said the giant, "that I must come into the tree after you. How comes it that of late nothing goes well with you?"

"Misfortunes follow in the footsteps of age," the friar replied. "But complain not, go your way, and leave me like an ancient crow. The rooks will come in the morning and have revenge on me."

"Leave him!" Little John growled under his breath, as he clutched a branch and drew himself up. "By my faith! The old man's senses must be leaving him. What would Robin Hood say if I went back without him? What should we do without Friar Tuck?"

After some little search he came upon the friar, who was in as comical a plight as ever man found himself.

The bough, acting like a spring, had sent him spinning up and lodged him, knees and chin touching, in the fork, one portion of which had gone clean through his cassock.

"Heaven help you, friar!" said Little John. "I shall never get you out of this without cutting the branch away."

"Then farewell to a man of peace," said the friar. "Imagine the bump with which I shall reach the earth."

"Hush!" whispered Little John, hoarsely. "The Normans approach."

They were coming in numbers, too. The lodge outside the ranger's house had been filled with sleeping men, but now they were up and abroad, and armed to the teeth.

"I thank Heaven," Little John muttered under his breath, "that the moon has hidden her face behind a bank of

clouds, or that fiend in a wolf skin would track us as easily as a stoat tracks a hare."

Even while Little John was speaking Anak, animal-like, stood with his head thrown back, sniffing the air, while Renault's crossbowmen, crouching in the undergrowth, were ready to shoot at a moment's notice.

"Shoot into the trees," Renault said, suddenly. "The loss of a few score bolts will be a matter of no moment."

"The saints defend me!" Friar Tuck groaned inwardly. "I am in a pretty position to be shot at."

Streams of perspiration poured down the face of the man of peace. It burst in great beads on his brow, and running down, got into his eyes and made him blink.

Whizz! A bolt crashed into the tree, cutting away leaves and twigs by the score; and so close did the hasty messenger go to Friar Tuck that it seemed to graze his neck.

Another and yet another bolt was shot, and it really seemed that Friar Tuck's moments were numbered, for the pointed, death-dealing shafts, while going wide of Little John, came nearer and nearer to the priest each time.

But not a sound escaped the friar's lips now, and he was determined that even though he were pierced he would send his teeth through his tongue rather than let it give utterance to a cry of pain.

"No man in this tree, Sir Evremond," said one of the crossbowmen.

"Wait!" responded Renault. "Yonder come Wildebrand and Sache, bringing lanthorns with them."

"This ends it," thought the friar. "It is all over. The next bolt will fetch me down like a partridge ready for roasting."

Wildebrand and Sache, swinging the lanthorns to and fro, came quickly along and halted beneath the tree.

"Anak," said Renault, "see you any signs of the fugitives?"

The hideous object in human form went down on his hands and knees and examined the earth.

"Ough! ough!" said he, grunting like a pig. "Here are the footprints of

one man, and they go no further. They are the footprints of a giant, of the man I saw in the forest, leaning on the handle of an axe."

"It must be the terrible Little John!" Wildebrand cried, starting back. "Who has not heard of him? With one blow he cut through helmet, head, and chin of a baron, and then with his mighty fists cleared a path through a score of armed men. The country people sing of his prowess. His name is as a household word."

A grim smile spread over Little John's face as he heard this, but it soon changed to a look of dismay. The wind began to roar through the forest, and the branches of the tree to which he clung swayed and creaked ominously. If they gave way he would fall on the very heads of the foe!

As to poor Friar Tuck, he was like a great fat baby tied in a cradle, unable to move.

It was evident that Sir Evremond Renault had contrived to make friends with Anak, for they were now on most amicable terms.

The critical moment came.

"Anak," said the knight, "climb into the tree, and if you find nothing but what belongs to it, we will return and bide our time."

"Now or never," thought Little John. "If I perish, so will the poor old friar, but I will never leave him while I have breath in my body. Friar," he whispered, "catch hold of the branch above your head, and cling to it as you love your life."

Friar Tuck, more dead than alive, did as he was told, and then Little John, bending his legs and clutching his axe in a vice-like grip, prepared to leap into the midst of the Normans.

They gathered round the tree as Anak began to swarm up it monkey-like; but he had scarcely reached the lowest branch when the tree seemed full of men, tumbling one after the other.

Little John brought Anak down, and, crushing him underfoot, rushed in among the Normans like a demon, shouting, bellowing, and striking right and left such blows as even he had never struck before.

The astounded and terrified Normans fled from this tornado of fury. Sir Evremond Renault was the first to get far beyond the sweep of that terrible axe; Anak crawled away, and soon there was not a man within fifty yards of the panting giant.

Little John was not slow to take advantage of the confusion he had created.

"Ho, there, foresters! Ho, there, sons of the free!" he bellowed. "This way! Down with the tyrants! No Normans! England for the English! Death to the oppressors!"

A panic seized Sir Evremond Renault and his followers. Back to the ranger's hut they flew, leaving Little John master of the field.

And how he laughed! Loud, clear, and defiant this sound rang out, awakening the birds, and scattering the affrighted deer in all directions.

"And now to liberate the man of peace," said Little John as he made his way back to the tree in which Friar Tuck was still fixed. "My faith! that only shows what one man can do when he is put to it. Friar," he added, pulling himself from branch to branch hand over hand, "come forth!"

Friar Tuck gave such a mighty wriggle that his cassock was torn away from the branch which held it, and the man of peace came forth so quickly that had not Little John caught him by the girdle he would have dropped like a stone.

"John, my son," said the friar as they stood side by side on the solid earth, "if I live for a hundred years, I shall never forget that I owe you my life."

"Never mind what you owe me," replied the giant, low down his chest. "Let us be thankful that we are both alive and unharmed. Friar, I make no boast, but I have accounted for three Normans dead, and I'll swear as many more will require a good deal of healing before they draw sword or put cross-bow to shoulder again. Heaven be praised! here is the path again, and now we'll to the cave and report what we have seen and done to Robin Hood in the morning."

CHAPTER 4.

The Storming of Renault's Stronghold.

SOUTHAMPTON, like most go-ahead places, is fast losing its ancient landmarks, but it still retains with pride its magnificent "Bar," under which electric cars, laden with business people and pleasure-seekers, hum and whir.

Through the Bar, turn westward, descend a narrow street full of quain courts and alleys, and you come to the Arundel Tower, at an angle of a splendid stretch of walls, upon which people walk and perhaps dwell upon an eventful past.

For here is the West Gate, still in excellent preservation, and under its archway marched the victors of Crecy, and in years after the no less redoubtable warriors of Agincourt and Poitiers.

We can imagine them clad in harness of steel, shouting, "God and St. George for Merry England!" as they embarked, encouraged by the shouts of spectators crowding the walls and the windows of the palace, not far away, where many years before Richard I. granted the charter, and which was often visited by his frowning, cruel-hearted brother John.

It is with the West Gate and its surroundings we have to deal when the lion-emblazoned banner dear to Richard waved from the walls.

The water came up almost to the teeth of the portcullis, the spiked jaws of which were opened to admit a man in all the splendour of shining armour and richly-worked coat-of-arms.

Stepping from a boat, steadied by the brawny arms of the men who had propelled it, Sir Evremond Renault passed under the West Gate, and turning sharp to the right, mounted a winding staircase affording a view of a magnificent courtyard hemmed in by walls many feet thick. Renault, the tax-gatherer, needed rest, and if peace and safety were to be found, surely such a lodging as he had been provided with afforded both. Westward lay a wide expanse of water, fed by river and ocean; eastward, and indeed all around

him, the walls of a fortress that no foe had dreamed of attacking.

The room immediately above the gate was fitted as a sleeping apartment for Renault, and thither he retired with his Wildebrand for the purpose of removing his armour.

The rest of his retainers had entered by a gate in what is now known as Bugle Street.

Moreover, the fortress was strongly garrisoned by a number of picked men, for there was trouble between England and France, and the port, unless well guarded, afforded facilities for invasion.

Renault, the tax-gatherer, had been enjoying himself on the great stretch of water, and the strong air had brought with it a longing to rest.

For some nights past Renault had been unable to sleep. Not only had he the fear of Robin Hood and his archers in his heart, but Arthur Lovedale, although he had never seen the man, haunted him.

He pictured him as a stalwart man, rendered reckless and savage by the loss of his home and the treatment meted out to his wife and children; and at any moment he might appear and demand satisfaction for those crimes.

"Wildebrand," Renault said, as he threw himself at full length on his couch, "this Anak is a mystery to me. He seems to have no memory of anything save his wild life in the forest. Like a beast, he is docile after being fed, but he may break out again. What have you done with the fellow? I have not seen him since we found lodgment here."

"He is safe," Wildebrand replied. "I take care that he wants for nothing. All day long he eats and sleeps, and at midnight, when the town is quiet, I send him into the forest."

"Let him not come near me," Renault said, shuddering. "His brute nature may return at an awkward moment. Makes he mention of aught that he sees when prowling in the forest?"

"Nothing, save that with all his pains, added to his cunning, he cannot discover Robin Hood's secret hiding-place."

"The arch-rebel, fearing capture, may have fled."

"Sir Knight," said Wildebrand, secretly delighting in Renault's restless state of mind, "it may be possible that Arthur Lovedale sought and found him. The New Forest is almost boundless in extent, and no one man has explored it yet. For full twenty miles it extends. Turn your eyes to the right, and you will see how it stretches along by the banks of the fast-flowing river."

"Enough!" growled Renault. "My eyes ache with weariness. When I awake I will summon you by striking on the gong."

Wildebrand withdrew with his tongue in his cheek.

"Renault is a coward," he said, as he descended into the courtyard. "I always knew it, but I did not believe that he was such a craven wretch. Even now he is turning his eyes towards France; but I will keep good watch on him, for if he goes he will take care to empty the coffers before he starts! Yet," he added, tapping the side of his nose with his forefinger, "he can make a bargain with me to our mutual advantage. But I will see Anak first."

Taking a key from his girdle, Wildebrand passed out of the courtyard into a passage, with others diverging from it, all filled with dark recesses. Here the common order of retainers lived, and their gruff voices in conversation sounded as if coming from the bowels of the earth.

At the end of the passage, lighted by narrow gratings in the roof, Wildebrand stopped, and throwing open a door entered a cell, in which Anak lay curled up on his bed of straw for all the world like a pig in a sty.

"Rouse up!" said Wildebrand. "I would have a word with you."

"What, has night come again?" Anak growled, raising himself on his elbow. "I'll not go forth yet. My joints are stiff, and my bones ache with fatigue. Have a care how you treat me, for I'll be slave to no man."

"It is still day," Wildebrand replied. "The lamp burning over your head deceives you. See, I have brought you

an extra flask of wine. Am I not kind?"

"So kind, good Wildebrand, so kind!" Anak said, snatching the flask and thrusting the neck of it into his mouth. "Good! I feel better now, although it always leaves me cold and shivering, and sends me bad dreams."

"Anak," said Wildebrand, leaning his back against the door, "I have been conversing with your master, Sir Evremond Renault."

Anak shook the straw from his shaggy hair, and stood up.

"Master! He is no master of mine!" he cried hoarsely. "Listen to me, Wildebrand! I like not this locking of doors. I have been used to freedom, and the sight of these stone walls puts strange thoughts into my head. I made a bargain with Renault, and he has not kept it. Let him look to himself."

"What, do you threaten him?"

"I never threaten without striking," Anak replied. "I do this man's bidding, and he treats me like a hound. What would he say if I forced my way to the banqueting hall and seated myself at his side?"

"You would be a fool to do it," Wildebrand said. "It would be the signal for your death."

"And his, for I would brain him if I read treachery in his eyes!" Anak responded. "I'll have no more of this. I go free to the forest at night, and skulk back to find myself a slave. Go tell him that I must be allowed to roam about at will."

"Shall I also say that you have learned to hate him?"

Anak started, and drew so near to Wildebrand that the latter laid his hand upon his dagger ready to defend his life.

"I'll do you no harm, although I could crush you with these hands of mine," Anak said. "So you have wormed my secret from me? Do I talk in my sleep? Have you been listening?"

"No; but I can tell when a man is discontented even when he appears to be satisfied."

"Well, I do hate him. His courage

lies in the armour he wears, in his weapons of sharpened steel and the men he can call to his assistance. Tell him so, if it pleases you; I care not."

Wildebrand saw his chance, and made full use of it.

"Why should you always live in this state, while a life of ease and comfort awaits you?" he said. "The gold you affect to despise can do everything. It will buy rich food, fine clothes, speedy horses—ay, and men, too, for even a king would find himself without a single courtier were it not for gold."

Anak, drawing his hooked fingers through his knotted hair, listened.

"I know—I know!" he replied. "I see the truth of what you say at every turn. What then?"

"What then! What if you were in the possession of as much gold as would buy all these things? What if I can tell you how to get it?"

"Now—now," exclaimed Anak, clutching Wildebrand's arm with his great hairy hands, "I begin to see. You know where this gold is? You and I are to share it?"

"Yes; but hush! Speak low, for many a knave in this fortress has long ears and a still longer tongue," said Wildebrand, in accents of alarm. "Renault is a bad man. After you have served him, he will kill you. He has told me so himself."

Anak's huge frame trembled with fury.

"He shall not live!" he snarled. "I will kill him the next time I see him!"

"Patience! You must nurse your revenge. Listen, and let not your passion gain the mastery. When I come again, I will bring you a gown to hide your bare limbs. At midnight, when I release you as usual, I will put a key—ay, and something more—into your hand! You know the West Gate?"

"Ay, I know it," Anak replied, grinding his teeth.

"Sir Evremond Renault sleeps there. Under his pillow you will find a bunch of keys. They are the keys to a vault and the coffers that contain the gold. You will bring them to me; we will share the treasure and flee. A boat

shall be waiting near the steps that lead to the gates."

"Glorious! Brave Wildebrande, I love you."

"But if you fail," proceeded the villain, "run to the postern, and straight to the forest, and return at your usual hour in the morning."

"I will not fail, trust me!" Anak replied, with his hands clenched and his eyes aglare. "We'll have the gold, and seek no more after Robin Hood."

"You will be secret? You will not rave of this after I have gone?"

"No," Anak said. "There is a noise in my head and ears even now. I want to throw myself down and sleep again. The wine you gave me was strong and old. You—you did not drug it?"

"Pshaw! If that had been my intention I should not have chosen such a time as this. I might have done it times out of number. Your life has always been in my hands."

"True! I forgot," Anak said, pressing his hand on his brow. "Come when you will, and you will find me ready."

"He has taken the bait," Wildebrand thought, as he passed out of the cell and closed the door behind him. "I am a rich man. There shall be but one occupant of the boat after the deed is done—only one!"

When night came Anak awoke, and found lying at his side a loose, monkish gown. He had scarcely enveloped himself in it when the lock of the door turned and Wildebrand stole in.

He put a key and a long, keenly-pointed dagger into Anak's hands, saying:

"Sir Renault sleeps. He has eaten so well and long that he now lies as senseless as a log of wood."

"I understand," mumbled Anak, nodding his head. "Fear not but that I will strike home. The postern is open so that I can escape when the deed is done?"

"I have seen to that," Wildebrand replied. "Dispatch on your errand. I will wait for you at the base of the staircase. Be silent, swift, and sure."

Wildebrand hastened away, leaving Anak clutching the deadly weapon.

The plot seemed easy enough to carry

out, but he knew that there were the sentries, expert crossbowmen every one, to be reckoned with.

What, he thought, if this should be a trap set by Renault and Wildebrand to catch him?

Anak determined to meet cunning with cunning. Attaching his club to his waist with a cord, and keeping the dagger hidden in the folds of the loose-fitting robe, he glided like a ghost down the passage.

Loud snoring and guttural sounds fell upon his ears as he went stealthily along. The men-at-arms who were off duty were sound asleep and only a few paraded the walls, keeping watch and ward, and crying the hours in dismal and monotonous tones.

"Twelve o'clock; dark and cloudy!" High above Anak came the words, and then the sentry slouched away to another part of the fortress.

Nearer and still nearer the spectre-like figure of the Demon of the Forest crept towards the West Gate. When within a few yards of it, he saw Wildebrand crouching in the shadow of the staircase.

Anak exchanged signals with him and was in the act of ascending, when from the ramparts there came a sudden cry of alarm and the loud beating of a gong.

Through the postern men were coming, tumbling over each other in hot haste.

Robin Hood and Little John led the way, with Friar Tuck, restraining the savage impetuosity of Arthur Lovedale, in near attendance.

Quickly following came Will Scarlet, Much the Miller's son, Allan-a-Dale, and a host of others.

And now, throwing off all reserve, they shouted:

"No Normans! Sweet Liberty or Death! Where is Renault, the murderer and tyrant?"

The sentries fled from the walls, the men-at-arms awoke, and snatching up their weapons, always ready to hand, rushed out to oppose the foresters.

To shoot with accuracy in such darkness as prevailed was an impossibility; but the foresters, discharging their

arrows low, brought several Norman soldiers down, and then charged with their swords in hand.

The noise was deafening.

Little John hewed a path for Robin Hood, and then dare strike no more lest he should bring some of his own comrades down.

In the meantime Anak had torn off the robe, and now stood in his real character, club in hand, and snarling like a wild beast.

Wildebrand, stricken with terror, took refuge behind the Demon of the Forest; but Anak, calling him coward, beat him to a distance.

In spite of all opposition Robin Hood and his warriors were making headway against the men-at-arms, who, growing in numbers every moment, rushed to the fray with spears and halberds.

"Saxons, strike home!" Robin Hood thundered. "Keep well together! Shoulder to shoulder, lads! We'll have the fox out of his hole yet!"

"Death to Renault!" roared Little John, using his axe again. "Who makes war upon innocent women and children! Renault the base! Renault the cruel!"

Arthur Lovedale took up the cry, what time he fought with the strength and ferocity of two men.

"My faith!" cried Friar Tuck, as he laid about him, "this is the hardest work the man of peace has done for some time. Heads seem to grow like mushrooms in this part of the world."

It was at this juncture that Sir Evremond Renault awoke with a start. The din and clamour of the fight were mixed up in his dreams, until the clash of steel and the wild cries of contending men came so close as to recall him to his senses.

Looking through the window facing the courtyard he saw the struggling mass of humanity and knew that the fortress had been successfully stormed.

Whether by strategy or treachery he had no means of ascertaining. It was not the time to ask questions or waste time in conjecturing.

He must save his own life, or perish at the hands of Robin Hood or one of his redoubtable archers.

But which way could he go? There was but one door to the room, and that led to the courtyard where the mad fight was proceeding.

It was at this moment that Wildebrand, who was trying to sneak round by the wall, found himself caught by the throat by Arthur Lovedale.

"Mercy!" he cried. "I surrender! It was not I who ordered the horrid murders! Renault is to blame! Renault has brought me to this!"

Sir Evremond heard these words, and the blood rushed from his face, leaving his very lips white and ghastly.

Anak fled up the staircase round which the Normans were huddling together like a flock of sheep in a thunderstorm, and totally disorganised. He thrust the key into the lock of a door, and giving it a quick turn, rushed into the room.

"Save yourself!" he yelled to Renault. "I will go with you. Robin Hood and his warriors are here! Your men are falling like oxen!"

"Save myself!" Sir Evremond echoed. "Whither shall I go? Which way can I turn to escape from this champion of a vile herd of rebels?"

"There is a boat below," Anak replied. "Wildebrand placed it there, but he will not require it, for he is dead."

"Dead! I heard a woeful cry just now, but——"

"It came from Wildebrand's lips, now silent for ever," Anak replied. "Stand aside! I will show you how to escape from here."

Poising his club, he struck such tremendous blows on the window frame that stone and woodwork gave way with a crash.

"Leap!" he shouted. "The tide is running out, and there is no danger. Hark! The foresters have beaten the men away from the staircase, and are coming up."

Sir Evremond Renault, fearing the death he justly deserved, placed his foot on the sill and leapt blindly into the darkness.

He uttered a cry of dismay as he sank waist deep in mud and water.

An instant after Anak came flying

through the air, and scrambled to his side.

"Here is the boat!" said the wild man, shaking the water from his matted hair. "Hold fast to it while I lift you in. Why, man, you are as helpless as a child. Quick, for soon barbed shafts will be flying after us!"

Half-dead with fright, choking with water and covered with mire and slimy weeds, Sir Evremond scrambled into the boat and seized the oars, for Anak did not know how to use them.

It was at that moment that the foresters entered Renault's apartments above.

"The villain has escaped!" cried Arthur Lovedale, thrusting his head and shoulders through the smashed window.

"Courage!" said Robin Hood, running to his side. "He will not avoid the fate of the cruel and unjust."

CHAPTER 5.

Fugitives in the Forest.

DISAPPOINTED, but still victorious, Robin Hood returned to his men and found them masters of the field.

The Normans had fled, some to the town, others to secret hiding-places known to them in the grim fortress.

The outlaw was in no immediate hurry to depart. He had not taken so long a journey as to dream of going away empty handed. The room over the West Gate was searched, the keys discovered, and a Norman, being dragged on his knees into Robin's presence, told of their use.

With glee the foresters flocked to the vault and shouted with joy as they burst open the coffer filled with money and valuables.

"Were it not that every groat was stolen in the first instance," said Friar Tuck, "the man of peace would blush at such a sight as this. But where is my son, Little John?"

"Stopping a gash in his side, and attending to our wounded," Will Scarlet replied. "Surely the arm of Heaven shields us, for we have not lost a single man, and the wounds are but of little consequence."

"There will be much tolling of bells

for dead Normans," Arthur Lovedale said. "See, my sword is notched."

"Put it away until you have further use for it," Robin Hood said. "Men, fill your wallets, and when in the forest we have healed our wounds and bruises and rested, we'll proclaim our victory to the Saxon peasantry, and bid them come to us for relief."

"Oh, glorious Robin Hood!" Friar Tuck cried, with genuine enthusiasm. "Your heart bleeds with pity for the weak and poor. When you are gone where shall be found the man to replace you?"

"Sing my praises if you will, but let me be out of hearing," Robin Hood said. "'Tis time we were gone, so let us away."

Such of the Normans as had taken flight into the town sought refuge in the houses, but some time elapsed before they could make the people understand what had happened.

Some said that the fugitives lied, since it seemed impossible that Robin Hood, with scarce fifty men, should take the fortress and scatter the garrison. Besides, was not Robin Hood the King of Sherwood Forest, and did he not dwell merrily in his own domain? How, then, could he be in two places at once?

But at last, when they were made to understand, they bolted their doors and listened with quaking hearts as the tramp, tramp of the victorious foresters echoed through the streets.

With Renault, the tax-gatherer, they had but little sympathy, for when Saxons could not be made to pay, and the Jews fled, carrying their gold with them, the less powerful of the Normans were made to suffer.

So they hated Renault secretly while they praised him openly and tossed their caps into the air as he passed along.

Day dawned, and then the people swarmed into the streets; and such a chattering and holding up of hands and rolling up of eyes was never seen in the quaint town with its odd-looking houses.

The habitations were of all shapes and sizes. Here were mud huts plastered

with wattles, after the Roman fashion; then great buildings crossed and recrossed with massive beams decorated with strange devices in iron. These last were the residences of the men whose great sailed argosies brought them wealth from all parts of the world.

At every window was a head; out of every door poured people until the streets were filled.

Robin Hood! Robin Hood! The name of the outlaw passed from mouth to mouth, as if tongues could utter no other.

Yet while they called him rebel and robber, so that the ears of the spies might hear, many a heart leapt with joy at the downfall of Renault.

Some bore in mind what they had heard of the torture chamber deep down under the fortress, whither men were carried never to return. Others bore in mind the dead bodies that had floated in with the tide, and others still groaned and bit their lips as they thought of the gold taken from them under threats that had caused them sleepless nights and blanched their hair.

A bearded Jew, old and hoary, came along, leaning heavily on a stick and muttering and mumbling to himself.

"Father of Abraham!" he cried. "It is only just. Was I not at the coronation of Richard, when the Normans, without cause or reason save for plunder, accused us of treason and fell upon us like savages? Can I forget that massacre? The flames of the blazing houses are ever before my eyes; the shrieks and vain cries for mercy ring in my ears even now. I care not whether Robin Hood be Jew or Gentile, but he is a just man."

"Hang the heathen!" bellowed a fellow in a greasy blouse. "This is Maliechi, who lost his teeth because he would not pay the tax demanded of him!"

"Heathen! Spirit of my father! hear what the wretch said," Maliechi exclaimed, straightening his bent back. "Is this the teaching of your Master? Is this your Christianity? You, who came flocking over with sword-brand in your hands, and wearing the emblem

of the Crucifix on your breasts? Ha, ha, ha!"

"Leave old Maliechi alone," said a young man, placing himself in front of the Jew. "His sorrows have driven him mad. Let him go to his home and rave and mumble there. Get you gone, father, or the rattle of your tongue will bring mischief on your head."

"Yes, I will go," Maliechi responded. "I go to pray for Robin Hood! He is a just man! Kind Heaven has sent him to avenge the insults and cruelties inflicted on the helpless. His name shall never die. No; it shall be heard in this land so long as there is a tongue to utter it and a hand to write it."

Once during the morning there was a report that Robin Hood was on his way back leading a great force to sack the town, and a general stampede took place.

But the King of Sherwood Forest had no such intention. He was content with the victory achieved, and retired to the cave to rest and count the spoil snatched from the greedy Normans.

Some hours before the foresters reached their cave, the keel of a boat grated on that part of the seashore where the western edge of the great forest ran down to the ocean. As soon as the boat touched the land, Anak stepped briskly out, and literally dragged Sir Evremond Renault after him.

The knight had rowed until exhaustion overtook him, and then, falling to the flooring of the boat, he lay in a swoon, and the boat drifted on and on at the mercy of the tide. There was but little wind, or the frail craft would have capsized and put an end at once to the tax-gatherer and the Demon of the Forest.

But punishment does not always come swiftly to the wicked. Justice is blind, and keeps the point of her sword down, but when she strikes no man can turn aside the blow.

"Pig, what ails you?" Anak said. "Are you a man or a child, fit for nothing but a cradle? Up, I say, or I will brain you with my club! And why not? Did you not intend to kill me after I had served your purpose?"

"No; on my knightly honour, no!"

"Put not a lie into the lips of a dead man!" Anak said, threateningly. "Wildebrand told me of your purpose. But what does it matter? You and I are fugitives. You shall live in the forest with me, and you shall fight for me if needs be!"

Sir Evremond shuddered from head to foot. He was unarmed, for Anak had taken possession of his weapons, and so was master of the situation.

He must pacify this brute by pretending obedience; bide his time until he saw his way to escape.

"What shall I do?" he said, rising. "Do not blame me for sinking out of sheer weariness."

"Follow me! I know of a charcoal-burner who will give us food and shelter for some of those baubles on your fingers. 'Tis but a walk to his hut, scarce ten miles."

"Ten miles! There is not the strength in me to walk five," Sir Evremond moaned. "And as to these baubles, as you call them, they are rings of great value."

"So much the better," Anak said. "What, weak and tottering! Well, sit you a while, and sleep if you will. I promise to watch over you."

Over and over again the Demon of the Forest was tempted to kill the knight, but he stayed his hand, although his savage blood boiled within him.

"He shall be my slave," he muttered. "He shall be my hewer of wood and drawer of water. He has a castle of his own somewhere, I trow, and in it wealth. He shall tell me where to find it, and then I will crush him like a worm, for he would have slain me without mercy."

Even the terrors with which the Demon of the Forest inspired him did not deter Sir Evremond Renault from falling into a heavy, dreamless slumber.

For more than two hours he lay as one dead, and consciousness returned so slowly that the rustling of the trees and the rush of the water near at hand sounded in his ears like the gathering of men at a call to arms.

Indeed, he fancied that he was lying

in his tent while his officers paraded his band of robbers; but with the opening of his eyes came the bitter truth.

Anak was glaring with fiendish exultation into his face.

"See!" said the Demon of the Forest, opening his paw-like hand. "Here are the rings. I drew them from your fingers while you slept. And what fingers, too! Pah! they are more like the tendrils that shoot from sprigs hardened by the frosts of winter. And so white and dainty. But they will soon grow hard and brown. Rise and follow me. I'll hear no more of weariness."

"I am ready," Sir Evremond replied, rising and stretching his arms over his head. "Come, Anak, we will not talk in this strain. We must be friends."

"Oh yes, friends!" replied Anak, leering. "We will be friends, for I do not intend to lose sight of you."

Renault, brought to a state of abject wretchedness, made no reply, and plunged with his uncouth and awful-looking companion into the depths of the forest.

It seemed hours to the Norman knight before they came in sight of a dwelling; but at length, and just when Renault was ready to drop again, Anak stopped and pointed to a mud hut.

A slot cut in the wall did duty for a window, and some smoke, rising from a fire of damp wood, found its way through a hole in the roof.

"Osmund the Red is at home," Anak said. "Stand you still while I acquaint him of our coming."

"Why do they call him Osmund the Red?" Renault demanded.

"I know not, for his skin is black enough with smoke and grime," Anak replied. "But he may have earned the name for the use he makes of an axe which he keeps ever at his hand."

"I have heard it said," the Demon of the Forest continued, enjoying the startled look in the Norman's eyes, "that strangers have been seen to enter Osmund the Red's hut, but none to depart. But he knows me, and the edge of his axe will not be turned upon you unless I so desire it."

Sir Evremond Renault began to wish that he had stayed at the West Gate

and taken his chance; but wishes were of no avail now.

There was nothing to be done but to submit, and wait for the chance to slip away.

Anak walked to within ten paces of the hut, and then uttered a peculiar cry.

It brought a half-nude man, whose skin was as black as ink, to the door.

"What, my Anak!" he cried, rolling his eyes and showing his white teeth. "Welcome! What have you there? A prisoner? It is not like you to be troubled in such a manner."

"Let be," growled Anak. "This is no stranger. You have heard of Sir Evremond Renault?"

"Who has not?" Osmund the Red rejoined. "I know of many a hundred who would fill my hands with silver to know that he was dead."

"Be not too harsh in your thoughts towards him," said Anak, laughing hoarsely, "for he stands before you. Sir Evremond can, and will, make us rich. He has a castle, and what Norman with a stronghold has not hidden treasure? It matters not, Osmund, how he came possessed of it. I have seen and touched gold, and learned to love it. You and I will make ourselves happy in the spending of it. How we will feast and drink, and I vow that Sir Evremond Renault shall be our cup-bearer!"

"Come in," said Osmund the Red, eyeing the knight with no great favour. "My grandsire, so they say, was a Hungarian by birth, but the Normans were too crafty to let him have any of the plunder. Come in; we will talk of these things anon."

The air that came from the hut was so foul that Sir Evremond hesitated to obey the charcoal-burner's beckoning finger.

"Let me remain in the open air," the Norman pleaded. "My head aches; and I could not endure any place where a fire burns."

Anak advanced towards him with an ominous look.

"Take heed how you obey orders," he said, swinging his club in his hand. "You had no trifling from the Saxons

whom you robbed, and I will have none from you. Enter!"

Sir Evremond Renault shrugged his shoulders with a gesture of despair and resignation, and, bending his head, passed into the hut.

It was dark, and filthy beyond description.

A bed of straw lay heaped up in a corner, and the furniture consisted of nothing more than a huge block of wood, a roughly-constructed stool, and some shelves, which represented Osmund the Red's larder.

"I have nothing better than black bread and dried deer's flesh to tempt a knightly stomach with," the charcoal-burner said; "but I have a drink I make from mead and herbs."

"I have tasted it," Anak said, smacking his lips. "Bring it forth, and take this in payment."

Osmund the Red's eyes dilated as one of the magnificent rings that had bedecked Sir Evremond Renault's fingers lay gleaming and flashing in his hand.

"I am already rich without touching the knight's treasure, for this is worth a hundred nobles," he said to himself. "Anak is a child—a fool. If he has any more like this, I shall not trouble further."

Trembling with joy, he brought down from the topmost shelf three horn cups and a large and curiously-shaped bottle.

Sir Renault drank greedily, for his tongue was parched and swollen; but he had no relish for the black bread and dried meat that Anak and Osmund the Red devoured like a pair of famished wolves.

This they washed down with copious draughts of liquor, for Osmund the Red was in a hospitable mood, and produced another bottle.

Thrice did Sir Evremond hold out his cup to be filled, and then drowsiness overtook him. He heard the voices of the two uncouth men as if coming from afar, and then came a humming noise in his ears, as though he was surrounded by a drove of bees, and he fell into a sound sleep.

When he awoke the day was gone. No glimmer of light could he see coming through the hole in the ceiling or

the slot in the wall. The fire had long since burnt itself to a heap of ashes, and out in the forest the night seemed as black as pitch.

But soon Sir Evremond Renault's eyes grew more accustomed to the gloom, and he made out the figures of Anak and Osmund the Red stretched upon the floor.

They had drunk and eaten themselves into a state of insensibility, and lay like a pair of surfeited hogs.

Sir Evremond Renault had no weapon. Anak lay with his club under his back, and Osmund the Red had hidden his axe.

Yet two well-directed blows from the heavy stool would suffice. Anak and Osmund the Red were in his power, and the Norman knight reasoned within himself that he would be justified in killing them.

The stool was heavy, and in his weak state it was almost as much as he could poise in his hands. With difficulty he was moving with it across the hut when the sound of voices broke the quietude and made him pause. After hesitating a few moments he crept to the door and listened.

The strangers were some distance from the hut, but so still was the night that he could hear them plainly.

A sudden fear took possession of Sir Evremond, and, putting the stool down, he stole on tiptoe from the hut and hid himself in a clump of bushes.

Then it seemed that the strangers turned as if they had lost their way; and, indeed, they had.

"This is passing strange," said one, "but I am entirely at fault. How we missed Little John and the others will ever remain a mystery to me."

"Robin Hood!" Sir Evremond muttered, grating his teeth.

He placed his hand upon his heart, as if fearing that the very beating of it might betray him.

"By St. Anthony! the startled stag sent them full cry," replied another voice. "They missed the path, and while we were looking for them we missed ours. Would that we had stayed in our cave instead of coming out on this hunt so soon after our vic-

tory. We are over fatigued and our senses are dulled."

"No doubt you are right, friar," Robin Hood said. "But it is no time for regrets. Here are you and Allan-a-Dale and I out for a night in the forest, and we must make the best of it. Surely we shall find a cave of some sort; if not, we must roost like pheasants, in a tree."

"Good lack!" cried Allan-a-Dale. "I care not where it is so that I may rest these weary limbs of mine."

"We can all fit arrows on that string," Robin Hood remarked. "What says our good friar?"

"By the rood!" Friar Tuck replied, "I have been wondering this hour and more whether my legs are flesh and blood, or heated bars of iron. Is there no house in this part of the forest?"

"Even if we came upon one I would not trust to it," Robin Hood said. "We shall come to a resting-place soon."

Sir Evremond Renault's mind was busy at work. That Robin Hood and his two weary companions would not go far was certain, and Anak was the man to tell him if there was a cave near at hand, so Renault returned to the hut.

Anak had changed his attitude in his sleep, and disturbed by fitful dreams had rolled so near the door that the knight narrowly escaped stumbling over him.

"Anak, good Anak, I have great news for you!" Sir Evremond Renault whispered in his ear.

He shook him by the shoulder, too, but gently, for Anak, like a slumbering dog, was a dangerous creature to awake roughly.

The Demon of the Forest grunted and growled, and feeling something on his shoulder brushed it away.

"Rouse up!" the knight continued. "Do you not hear me? I have news—great news—for you."

Still growling, the Demon of the Forest raised himself on his elbow.

"Who calls?" he demanded.

"I, Sir Evremond Renault! Robin Hood, Friar Tuck, and a forester are near at hand, and so fatigued that they are scarcely able to drag their legs over the ground. They are searching for a cave——"

"They will not have to search far," Anak interrupted. "There are half a dozen within a mile."

"Good!" said the Norman. "Robin Hood must die, and you are the man to do the deed! Kill me this man, and all that I have shall be yours."

Anak's eyes began to blaze in the darkness.

"You swear it?" he demanded, pressing his hand to his throbbing head.

"By all that I hold sacred. Delay not! Now is the hour."

"Things that are sacred will not help you or me," Anak said with a short laugh. "Wait you here; I will go alone, and bring you some token that Robin Hood is dead!"

"Give me your hand on that," said the delighted knight. "We will share the glory of this. Osmund the Red need not know."

"No; let him lie there snoring, but still I will make some use of a friend of his."

"A friend of Osmund the Red's!" said Sir Evremond Renault, staring. "What mean you, Anak?"

"In a shed behind the hut he keeps a savage hound trained to hunt so silently that it utters no sound even when it pounces on its prey. The brute knows me, and will do my bidding."

"Let not the beast come near me," the knight said. "He may take me for an enemy, and fix his fangs in my throat."

"Fear not," replied Anak, laughing again. "You will never die under the jaws of a hound."

"You put a riddle to me," Sir Evremond remarked.

"Ask a cordwinder to answer it," Anak replied. "But I must go. Get you within the hut, and move not. Now for the hound, and then away!"

CHAPTER 6.

How the Demon Made a Mistake.

"A PLACE of shelter at last," said Robin Hood. "A cave, but so dark that better eyes than mine are needed to tell the depth of it."

"Let me enter first," Allan-a-Dale said.

He went forward with his arms extended, and testing the ground at every step.

"Here is the end," he said suddenly. "The cave is about thirty feet in length, and the ground seems firm and dry."

"Go you next, friar," Robin Hood said, "and I will follow."

"Not I, by St. Anthony!" Friar Tuck replied in a tone that admitted of no argument. "I have accustomed myself to sleep like a watch-dog, with one eye open, so I'll rest near the mouth of the cave. Say no more, I pray you, good Robin, for once I have made up my mind it is like the law of the Medes and Persians—that altereth not."

"As you will," said Robin Hood, throwing his bow and quiver into the cave. "By my faith, you should not be there alone, but a wound which I did not discover until after our victory gives me some little trouble. I will sleep away the sting of it."

Allan-a-Dale, who also had received some hard knocks in the storming of Renault's stronghold, had already thrown himself down, and soon both the King of Sherwood Forest and he were as sound asleep as if their limbs rested on beds of down.

Friar Tuck, having taken such observations as the darkness would allow, placed his quarter-staff just inside the cave; then, taking a coil of rope from his waist, he formed it into a circle, and lay down within it, knowing that no adder or poisonous reptile would cross the rope.

How such a fact came to the knowledge of man it is impossible to say. The dwellers of our forests practised it a thousand years ago, and the red men of the Far West continue to do so to the present day.

Now Friar Tuck, weary and worn as he was, had made up his mind to keep awake.

It would be sufficient for him, so he cheerfully told himself, to rest his limbs, for was he not used to making long journeys without closing his eyes in sleep when duty called him to visit the sick?

Many and many a long trudge had the poor old friar taken through heat.

cold, snow, and rain; never grumbling, and taking hope wherever he went.

But strong as he was, nature was not to be denied; so while Friar Tuck was determined to keep awake, his weary body was just as determined that he should go to sleep.

It was a fight between the two, but at last the friar's will gave way. His head fell upon his arm, and in a moment more he began to journey through the land of shadows.

And as he lay, Anak, the Demon of the Forest, clutching a great, shaggy hound by the neck, came sneaking along in the darkness.

The hound half-stopped at the rope and then led the man away from it. Anak saw nothing, but trusting to the instinct of the animal, followed. They reached the mouth of the cave and passed in.

Then Anak, clutching his club, stole forward a few steps, and tripping over a stone, uttered a cry of pain and fury.

Allan-a-Dale awoke and started to his feet, only to receive a stunning blow that sent him staggering with his hand to his face, full of anguish.

His cry of agony brought Robin Hood to his senses, and in a moment he was battling with the Demon of the Forest and the hound.

"Seize him, Pluto! Pull him down!" Anak yelled. "We have him at last! Down you go, bold Robin Hood, never to rise again!"

Robin Hood thrust out his arm to ward off a blow aimed at him by Anak, and shook the dog off.

Yet the chances were that the victory would lay on the side of the cowardly foe. Another blow, another attack from the hound, would bring him to his knees.

Where was Friar Tuck? Was the faithful old man lying dead outside the cave, slain by this monster in human form and the brute with glaring eyes and foaming jaws?

As quickly as the lightning tears through the forest, when tempest convulses earth and heaven, these thoughts flashed into Robin Hood's mind.

They were answered by a shout, and as the Demon of the Forest raised his

club to strike again, Friar Tuck rushed in, and lassoing him, pulled him violently backwards.

"Wait a moment, my friend!" he cried cheerily. "Do not be in such a hurry with that bit of wood!"

At the same moment Robin Hood clutched the hound by the throat. They fell to the ground together, and, as luck would have it, the outlaw's disengaged hand came in contact with his sword.

Seizing it, he plunged the blade into the hound's side, and the pain-stricken animal wrenched itself from Robin Hood's grasp, leaped high in the air, and then rushed howling into the forest.

In the meantime Friar Tuck was standing on no ceremony with the Demon of the Forest. Dragging him by main force to a tree, the friar twisted the rope round the trunk with all his might. Then, while Anak struggled, moaned, and cursed, the friar ran back for his quarter-staff.

"St. Dunstan nipped the arch-fiend's nose with a pair of tongs, so the legend goes," cried Friar Tuck; "but it shall go down to posterity as a truth that I gave you such a clout that no man yet got over!"

The quarter-staff whirled in the air, and then descended with the force of a sledge hammer.

Anak's head fell on one side, his limbs quivered and began to stiffen, and Friar Tuck turned away, for he knew that some time would pass ere even such a man as Anak was could recover consciousness after receiving so heavy a blow.

"I am sick! I am faint!" the friar gasped, as he staggered back to the cave. "Forgive me playing the part of a woman, but——"

"And by St. Anthony, he has swooned like a woman!" cried Robin Hood, as he caught the friar in his arms.

But Friar Tuck's faintness was but of a few moments' duration. His eyes opened, and the deathly coldness passed away.

"Is it right that a man of peace should half-hang a man, and then knock the senses out of him with a quarter-staff?" he asked.

"Preserver of my life," Robin Hood cried, still holding him in his arms, "I vow that you were sent on earth to be my guardian angel."

"Nay, I am but a poor, feeble old man, yet with some sense of duty," the friar replied. "See how I fainted like a loon at the sight of the shadow of a donkey on a moonlit night. Pay no further heed to me, I pray you, but attend to Allan-a-Dale, who seems to be in sore straits."

"I fear the poor lad is badly hurt," Robin Hood replied. "Oh, that day would come! Oh, for a light of some kind!"

"I have had harder knocks," Allan-a-Dale said; "but this one caught me between the eyes, and I thought my sight was destroyed. Let me rest a while; the pain will pass away. Pshaw! I was a child to cry out about it."

"I have some simples here that will relieve the agony," Friar Tuck said, diving his hand into his wallet. "Come to me, lad, and I will dress your wound. There! There! You will be better soon. Now sit you down while Robin and I discuss whether it will be wise to remain here."

"Whither shall we go?" Robin Hood asked. "One danger is past, but others may await us in the forest."

"True!" replied the friar. "We must content ourselves with patience. Robin, pick up your bow and be on the alert. We will watch in company until dawn comes, be it clothed in red or grey."

They thought no more of sleep, and side by side the outlaw and the friar sat watching and listening, until the dark shadows began to trail through the forest like a legion of spectres banished to the realms of gloom.

An hour before the first thread of light appeared in the eastern sky, Sir Evremond Renault had fled from the charcoal-burner's hut.

The wounded hound came yelping and limping to the door to die. Then the Norman knight knew what had happened, and his base heart sank as though it had turned to lead.

Anak had failed, and Renault's guilty mind drew a picture of Robin Hood

tracking him to the hut and slaying him.

Leaping over the hound's dead body, he ran into the forest, running, leaping at random, and trusting to the darkness to shield him.

At length his limbs refused to support him, and, more dead than alive, he sank at the base of a tree, and burying his head in his arms, lay panting and shivering alone, an outcast with the brand of Cain upon his brow.

His mind became filled with horrors. He thought of self-destruction, but put it shudderingly from him, for there would be an awakening, and then the judgment.

The curses that had been heaped on his head by those he had persecuted were now taking effect.

Where were his armed men? What were title and the power he had so often boasted of worth now?

What arm was there strong enough to protect him, if Arthur Lovedale, thirsting for revenge, should capture him, or Robin Hood, the righter of wrongs, draw bow upon him?

He endeavoured to pray, but the words he tried to utter mocked him, and driven almost to a state of madness he called himself coward, liar, and hypocrite.

And as he lay, night shook out the folds of his sombre mantle and prepared to depart.

A bird stirring in a bush twittered as it withdrew its head from under its wing.

Another flew straight from its nest, and with swelling throat began to sing. And then as the dark clouds split into bands of amber and opal, a ribbon of golden light shot across the sky and the whole forest awoke.

The growing light was no boon to Sir Evremond Renault. At any moment it might betray him. He saw an enemy in every dancing shadow, and in every sound he heard a cry of the avengers. Again he rose, and seeking where the brushwood grew shoulder high, burrowed out of sight like a hunted fox.

But while day brought terrors to him, it brought hope to Robin Hood, and unspeakable joy to Friar Tuck's heart.

True, they discovered that Anak, the Demon of the Forest, recovering consciousness during the dark hours, had got free of the rope and disappeared. But they worried but little on that score.

Allan-a-Dale slept on, while the sunlight pierced the trees with ever-increasing shafts of light. When the friar touched him, he started up and began to mumble an apology for his laziness.

His eyes were badly swollen, but, thanks to Friar Tuck's skill, the inflammation was much reduced, and the pain almost gone.

"So pass the terrors of one awful night," said Robin Hood. "Friar, my gratitude is great."

"Heaven forbid that you should give thanks to me for aught that fell to my lot to do," Friar Tuck replied. "We are all instruments for good or evil, and can choose the path that leads to either. Come, let us go! We'll find a path that will take us to our friends, and when they gladden our eyes I trow we'll see no evil thing."

Even as he spoke there came, borne on the wings of the gentle breeze, the winding of a horn.

"Norman rangers or Saxons?" asked the friar, looking anxiously at Robin Hood.

"Norman never blew a horn so heartily," the outlaw replied. "I'll answer it, and if you hear three prolonged blasts you will know that Little John is nigh. Now listen. What did I tell you? My merry men are seeking us, and soon shall we be with them."

Not two horns, but twenty, were soon ringing out, and presently the Lincoln green tunics of the archers were seen.

On came the brave fellows, shouting and laughing in the joy of finding their leader alive.

"By Mars!" cried Little John, as both Robin Hood's hands disappeared in one of his great brown ones, "what a fright we have had! After bringing the stag down and skinning it, we returned by the same path as we thought, and found you gone. Then we harked back again, and, as I am a living fool,

I led these merry men miles away to nothing but darkness and misery."

"Why mention it, since everything has ended so happily?" Robin Hood replied. "Upbraid not yourself, honest John."

"Show me the man who boasts that he has never done a foolish thing, and I will say to you, 'Behold a cunning knave!'" said Friar Tuck. "Come, let us sit here beneath this spreading oak, and turn our thoughts first to eating and drinking, for I vow that I am so hungry that I could gnaw the bark from a tree. Then will we talk of other things. Ho, there, friend Lovedale, lend Will Scarlet a hand to light a fire; and when you, Little John, have done gazing at our chief, I pray you cut some goodly slices from the haunch which Ned Carter bears upon his shoulder."

But Robin Hood was anxious to tell his men what had hapened in the cave, and the story was related while the venison spluttered and hissed on pointed sticks.

"By my soul, and I say it as a man of peace, if I hear one more word of praise, I'll find a cell in some rock, and turn hermit," Friar Tuck said. "What, would you spoil my appetite and your own? Go to; I'll have no more of it. Ah, me, what a lovely thing is a meal to a really hungry man!"

"And drink to a thirsty one!" quoth Little John. "I'll speak if I die for it! Here is death to the man who ever says ill word of Friar Tuck!"

The toast flew from mouth to mouth, and a great shout went up, startling the rooks and sending them in all directions, cawing and expostulating noisily.

Without uttering a word, Friar Tuck got up, and turning his back upon the festive throng, walked away.

When he came back he rubbed his eyes and complained of a cold in his head.

"Mark that," Little John whispered to Arthur Lovedale. "The old man has been crying."

"Crying!" exclaimed the friar, overhearing the last word. "Say that again, you great baby, and I will fling a trencher at your head!"

"A song! a song!" cried Robin Hood. "Little John, you have a voice like a nightingale, when you like to use it, so sing us a ditty of trial and toil that ends in victory."

"My faith!" said Friar Tuck, "the rooks will die of envy now, for when Little John warbles——"

"I'll not sing if that man with the shaven crown be ever chattering at me like a chaffinch without a mate," the giant interrupted.

But sing he did, and his deep voice rolled like distant thunder amid the trees.

"Now to rest awhile," Robin Hood said, "and then to search the forest, for surely Sir Evremond Renault lies hidden in it somewhere. Aye, and Anak, the Demon, too! But him we will spare so long as he does not seek to harm us further. He is but a poor, raving madman."

"Little John," said Friar Tuck, sweetly, "sit you still, and I will make a pillow of your head."

"This after trying to make a laughing-stock of me!" little John grumbled. "But sleep in peace, friar, for there is no man in all the world, save Robin Hood, that I love so well as you. Shall I warble a lullaby?"

"Yes, if you wish to keep me awake and set my teeth on edge," said Friar Tuck. "Be quiet, now, for of a truth the man of peace has need to rest his brain and body."

Taking the hint that absolute silence would be required, the majority of the foresters picked up their bows, and withdrawing to a distance, amused themselves with bringing down some small game.

Two hours later, Robin Hood, Friar Tuck, and Allan-a-Dale awoke much refreshed.

"Boy," said the friar, "how goes it with your eyes?"

"I can just see out of them," Allan-a-Dale replied, laughing.

"Take a lesson from your misfortune," said Friar Tuck. "The eye is the index of the brain. Some people with strong eyes and weak brains try to see too much. Take our friend Little John, for instance."

Amid a roar of laughter, the giant started to his feet.

"I call upon our king to stop this!" he bellowed. "What has come over the friar to-day I know not, but he is like a nest of wasps buzzing about my ears. Silence him, I say!"

"Friar," said Robin Hood, "if you must let your wisdom loose upon Allan-a-Dale, withdraw with him to a distance and pour it secretly into his ear."

"Nay," replied Friar Tuck, his lips bubbling with mirth, "I have done. Little John always finds a way to stop me whenever I have anything to say for his good. He is a hardened sinner, but I will mould him into a softer mood ere long."

Just then one of the scouts came in and reported that a wandering band of Normans was approaching.

"If they are inclined for peace, let them pass," Robin Hood replied; "but if they come for war, they shall find that we are prepared for them. Ho, there, Will Scarlet! Go and bring us news what they are like."

Will Scarlet's brilliantly-hosed legs had not taken him far when the sound of a hunting-horn rent the air, and a man with two hounds on a leash confronted him.

"What do you in this part of the forest, fellow?" the stranger asked.

"I am looking for a man with a civil tongue, but have not found him yet," Will Scarlet retorted.

The man had not found words to answer this retort when a gay assembly of Norman knights and their attendants came up.

"This is no peasant," said one of the knights. "Answer me, rascal—where do you dwell?"

"Not near you, rascal, I thank Heaven!" Will Scarlet replied.

"By Mars! if you call me rascal, you shall hang!" said the knight in a towering rage.

"Make no such boast," Will Scarlet rejoined. "He who boasts often comes off second best. You bear the arms of the De Laidons. I know them well by repute. Your grandsire stole sheep for a living and died like a sheep-stealer, with his feet off the ground."

"And so shall you, Saxon dog!" cried the knight, beside himself with rage. "Ho, there, varlets! Bind his arms and swing him from a tree."

At that moment the man with the hounds dropped the leash with a loud cry, and fleeing to a bush plunged neck and heels into it.

"What ails the fool?" the knight said. "Has he been stung by a hornet?"

"There are many such hornets about," Will Scarlet remarked. "See! here they come in good earnest."

The knight staggered as Robin Hood and a score of his archers appeared from behind the trees, to which they had stolen in silence.

"Treason!" De Laidon gasped. "Who leads this vagrom band?"

"The King of Sherwood Forest, who stands before you," said Robin Hood, doffing his cap. "If you would know more of me and my merry men, go to South Hamtune, and you will hear such news as will set your ears a-tingling. But as you appear to be in ignorance I will tell you. Sir Evremond Renault is a fugitive marked for vengeance, and the garrison is in disorder, and in no mood to join issue with my archers again."

"This must be a lie," De Laidon hissed, turning pale and quailing under Robin Hood's stern glance.

"All Normans should be excellent judges of lies, since truth is a stranger to them," Robin Hood retorted. "But what is this?" he added, turning to where Will Scarlet stood struggling in the grasp of two of the Norman retainers.

"Naught; but this great and noble knight had a desire to see how I looked hanging from a tree," Will Scarlet said as he wrenched himself free.

"Say you so? Then he shall pay heavily for his threat. Come down from your horse, Sir Knight, and all that follow him throw down your arms. Men, make ready to shoot."

"Hold!" cried De Laidon, clambering out of the saddle. "I did but jest."

"It is an ugly jest to tell a man that you will hang him," Robin Hood said. "Moreover, it is a jest that calls for

recompense; so deliver up your horse, your sword, and purse."

"Rebel!" De Laidon cried, "I'll not be robbed by such as you."

"Then I'll strip your coat-of-arms from your back, strike the spurs from your heels, and have you flogged like a common thief."

"I'll set an army at you," De Laidon declaimed. "Neither you, nor any of your gang, shall leave this forest alive."

"Surely, then, I ought not to let you live to see the catastrophe?" Robin Hood said. "Little John, since this noble knight is so obstinate, I pray you act as body-servant to him. Archers, keep your eyes on these Norman hirelings, and mark the first man whose hand goes to his sword."

De Laidon's face at that moment was a study.

Rage and fear struggled for the mastery, and the last-named gained the day.

"I must submit," he said. "But, unless you are a knave, you will return my sword and cross yours with it."

"Spoken like an honest man," cried Robin Hood. "I crave your pardon somewhat for the harsh things I said; but the threat to hang one of my faithful followers is no light matter to me. Sir Knight, I will try conclusions with you."

A large ring was formed, and for once Saxons and Normans mingled with each other without fierce looks and drawn swords.

Robin Hood and De Laidon at once set to it, and soon enough the Norman knight realised that he had found a foeman worthy of his steel.

Both men were splendid swordsmen, swift to thrust, parry, and up to every ruse taught in those days.

But Robin Hood proved the better man.

Within five minutes he brought De Laidon to his knees and swung his sword to and fro over his head.

"Do you yield?" Robin Hood demanded.

"I yield my life, but not my honour," De Laidon replied. "Strike!"

"By Heaven, your honour is as untarnished as your sword," Robin Hood

replied. "Rise, Sir Knight; give me your hand, and learn to know me better. And when you return to your castle and sit in the banqueting-hall, say that Robin Hood would rather perish than harm a hair of the head of a man who fought him fairly."

De Laidon rose, and the flush of shame died out of his face.

"Robin Hood," he said, "I take my leave of you, and the words you have uttered shall always find an echo in my heart. Farewell, but I pray not for ever. Perchance we shall meet again. Come, men, we will away."

"Hark! they cheer," said Friar Tuck. "The sound augurs well, for the time will come when Norman blood shall mingle with Saxon, and a lasting peace be proclaimed."

"Ages will pass away before that happens," Little John said.

"And ages passed away before this world was fit to live upon," Friar Tuck said. "But it is fair enough now, and would be fairer still but for the ways of men. Now shall we cheer our great king and chief, kindest friend and noblest foe!"

Robin Hood raised his cap in acknowledgment of the exclamations of his followers.

"Now to end our mission," he said. "Ere night falls so must Sir Evremond Renault. Ho, there! another stranger, but not such a one as will dispute our way."

Osmund the Red appeared, dragging his ungainly legs over the ground, and muttering to himself.

"What do you seek?" Robin Hood asked.

"The man who killed my hound," Osmund the Red replied.

"You behold him," Robin Hood replied, dragging him into the midst of the foresters. "Search a little further, and perchance you will find the demon that set the brute on me. I doubt not he is skulking somewhere near at hand."

Osmund the Red caved in at once.

"All this is passing strange to me," he said. "It is like a dream. Anak brought Sir Evremond Renault to me last night, and we feasted in company.

When I awoke, Anak and the knight were gone, and my dead hound lay at my door."

"You entertained one demon knowingly, and another unawares," Robin Hood said. "Lead us to your hut, and I trow we'll find the knight if he be in the forest. As for your hound, since you took no hand in the attack on me, here is a piece of silver to repay the loss."

"The sky rains rings and money," the charcoal-burner muttered to himself. "Come, then, to my hut. It matters not to me what your business is with the knight."

"By Robin Hood's permission," said Arthur Lovedale, "he goes with me to Lyndhurst, where my home once stood; there shall he suffer the penalty of the sins he has committed."

No sooner did the foresters reach the hut than the keen-eyed scouts discovered the trail of the fugitive.

Not a moment was lost then. Furnished with the information that the knight was footsore and weary, Arthur Lovedale, Will Scarlet, and Dick Driver started in hot pursuit, taking care, however, to keep within horn-blow of their comrades.

The day waned, and the sun took its western course, but still Renault was ahead. Through brake and briar, along intricate paths, and from under the trees where he had stopped to rest, they tracked him.

"On, on!" was now the cry. "We must take him before the sun goes down."

Suddenly the man they were searching for started up before them. Vengeance was at hand. The hour of retribution had come.

Sir Evremond Renault knew it, but still he ran, plunging through thorny brakes, leaping over bushes, and dodging behind trees.

But he was fully aware that he was within range of the foresters' bows.

Why did they not send barbed shafts after him?

Were they merely tormenting him as a cat torments a mouse?

It was horrible. It was worse than death.

Looking over his shoulder he saw Arthur Lovedale in advance of the others.

To the fugitive the wronged man looked like a demon, and Renault, with his heart in his mouth, uttered a dreadful cry and made a supreme effort.

Before him lay a dark thicket, shoulder high, and bowered over with trailing plants.

It was a wealth of wild, luxuriant growth, and a splendid place of concealment.

He put on a tremendous spurt, but a hopeless one, for Arthur Lovedale, who had saved his strength, raced up to him like a hare.

Sir Evremond Renault's heart failed him, his legs gave way, and he dropped like a stone.

"Mercy! Pity!" he cried. "Spare my life! I am rich, and——"

The words died away gurgling in his throat, for Arthur Lovedale had fallen upon him like a whirlwind of fury just as the rest of the band came upon the scene.

Little John pulled the incensed man away.

"Hold, Lovedale! The man who burnt your house and murdered your

neighbours—aye, and many others—will never get to Lyndhurst like that!"

Renault the Cruel, on hearing Lovedale's name, uttered a despairing cry, flung up his arms, and, falling upon his face, lay as if bereft of life.

"Bear him to the hut," Robin Hood said. "To-morrow he shall see the sun rise for the last time."

And, surely enough, the day had scarcely dawned again when Sir Evremond Renault, starting up from the place where he had lain, uttered a loud, despairing cry and fell prone to the earth. His heart, worn out with the terrors and exertions of the past few days after a misspent life, had failed him, and so death claimed a cruel and heartless tyrant, and man was saved the need of meting out the punishment he so richly deserved.

Friar Tuck kneeled for a few moments at the Norman's side.

"Requiescat in pace," he said solemnly when he rose to his feet. "Let us hope that he died repenting his sins."

In silence, then, Robin Hood and his foresters turned away—away to other scenes, and to other conflicts in the cause of liberty.

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